

Entheogenic use of cannabis

Cannabis has served as an entheogen—a chemical substance used in religious or spiritual contexts^[1]—in the Indian subcontinent since the Vedic period dating back to approximately 1500 BCE, but perhaps as far back as 2000 BCE. It was introduced to the New World by the Spaniards in 1530-45.^[2] Cannabis has been used by shamanic and pagan cultures to ponder deeply religious and philosophical subjects related to their tribe or society, to achieve a form of enlightenment, to unravel unknown facts and realms of the human mind and subconscious, and also as an aphrodisiac during rituals or orgies. There are several references in Greek mythology to a powerful drug that eliminated anguish and sorrow. Herodotus wrote about early ceremonial practices by the Scythians, thought to have occurred from the 5th to 2nd century BCE. Itinerant Hindu saints have used it in the Indian subcontinent for centuries.^[3] Mexican-Indian communities occasionally use cannabis in religious ceremonies by leaving bundles of it on church altars to be consumed by the attendees.^[4]



A man smoking cannabis in Kolkata, India.

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Indian subcontinent



Bhang eaters from India c. 1790. Bhang is an edible preparation of cannabis native to the Indian subcontinent. It has been used in food and drink as early as 1000 BCE by Hindus in ancient India.^[5]

Cannabis was often consumed in weddings or festivals honoring Shiva, who is said to have brought it down from the Himalayas. It is still offered to Shiva in temples on Shivaratri day, while devotional meetings called bhajans, although not necessarily associated with Shiva, are occasions for devotees to consume the drug liberally. Yogis or sadhus along with other Hindu mystics have been known to smoke a mixture of cannabis sativa and tobacco in order to enhance meditation. This is particularly common during the festival of Diwali and Kumbha Mela.^[4]



A sadhu, or holy person, smoking cannabis in Kolkata, India.

There are three types of cannabis used in the Indian subcontinent.

The first, bhang, a type of cannabis edible, consists of the leaves and plant tops of the marijuana plant. It is usually consumed as an infusion in beverage form, and varies in strength according to how much cannabis is used in the preparation. The second, ganja, consisting of the leaves and the plant tops, is smoked. The third, called charas or hashish, consists of the resinous buds and/or extracted resin from the leaves of the marijuana plant. Typically, bhang is the most commonly used form of cannabis in religious festivals.

In Tantric Buddhism, which originated in the Tibeto-Himalayan region, cannabis serves as an important part of a traditional ritual (which may or may not also include sexual intercourse). Cannabis is taken to facilitate meditation and also heighten awareness of all aspects of the ceremony, with a large oral dosage being taken in time with the ceremony so that the climax of the "high" coincides with the climax of the ceremony.^[7]

Ancient China

The sinologist and historian Joseph Needham concluded "the hallucinogenic properties of hemp were common knowledge in Chinese medical and Taoist circles for two millennia or more",^[8] and other scholars associated Chinese wu (shamans) with the entheogenic use of cannabis in Central Asian shamanism.^[9]

In the mountains of western China, significant traces of THC, the compound responsible for cannabis' psychoactive effects, have been found in wooden bowls, or braziers, excavated from a 2,500-year-old cemetery.^[10]

The oldest texts of Traditional Chinese Medicine listed herbal uses for cannabis and noted some psychodynamic effects. The (ca. 100 CE) Chinese pharmacopeia Shennong Ben Cao Jing (*Shennong's Classic of Materia Medica*) described the use of mafen 麻蕒 "cannabis fruit/seeds":

To take much makes people see demons and throw themselves about like maniacs (多食令人見鬼狂走). But if one takes it over a long period of time one can communicate with the spirits, and one's body becomes light [of weight] (久服通神明輕身).^{[11][12]}

A Taoist priest in the fifth century A.D. wrote in the *Ming-I Pieh Lu* that:

Cannabis is used by necromancers, in combination with ginseng to set forward time in order to reveal future events.^[7]

Later pharmacopia repeated this description, for instance the (ca. 1100 CE) *Zhenglei bencao* 證類本草 ("Classified Materia Medica"):

If taken in excess it produces hallucinations and a staggering gait. If taken over a long term, it causes one to communicate with spirits and lightens one's body.^[13]

The (ca. 730) dietary therapy book *Shiliao bencao* 食療本草 ("Nutritional Materia Medica") prescribes daily consumption of cannabis in the following case: "those who wish to see demons should take it (with certain other drugs) for up to a hundred days."

Cannabis has been cultivated in China since Neolithic times, for instance, hemp cords were used to create the characteristic line designs on Yangshao culture pottery). Early Chinese classics have many references to using the plant for clothing, fiber, and food, but none to its psychotropic properties. Some researchers think Chinese associations of cannabis with "indigenous central Asian shamanistic practices" can explain this "peculiar silence".^[7] The botanist Li Hui-lin noted linguistic evidence that the "stupefying effect of the hemp plant was commonly known from extremely early times"; the word *ma* "cannabis; hemp" has connotations of "numbed; tingling; senseless" (e.g., *mamu* 麻木 "numb" and *mazui* 麻醉 "anesthetic; narcotic"), which "apparently derived from the properties of the fruits and leaves, which were used as infusions for medicinal purposes."^[14] Li suggested shamans in Northeast Asia transmitted the medical and spiritual uses of cannabis to the ancient Chinese *wu* 巫 "shaman; spirit medium; doctor".

The use of Cannabis as an hallucinogenic drug by necromancers or magicians is especially notable. It should be pointed out that in ancient China, as in most early cultures, medicine has its origin in magic. Medicine men were practicing magicians. In northeastern Asia, shamanism was widespread from Neolithic down to recent times. In ancient China shamans were known as *wu*. This vocation was very common down to the Han dynasty. After that it gradually diminished in importance, but the practice persisted in scattered localities and among certain



Yangshao culture (ca. 4800 BCE)
amphora with hemp cord design

peoples. In the far north, among the nomadic tribes of Mongolia and Siberia, shamanism was widespread and common until rather recent times.^[15]

Robert Clarke and Mark Merlin, the authors of *Cannabis: Evolution and Ethnobotany*, suggest that:

After the rise of Confucianism, which spread from China through East Asia to Japan, the ingestion of cannabis resin for psychoactive, ritualistic purification was eventually suppressed in Japan, as it was in China.^[4]

Ancient Central Asia

The (ca. 440 BCE) Greek *Histories* of Herodotus record the early Scythians using cannabis steam baths.

[T]hey make a booth by fixing in the ground three sticks inclined towards one another, and stretching around them woollen felts, which they arrange so as to fit as close as possible: inside the booth a dish is placed upon the ground, into which they put a number of red-hot stones, and then add some hemp-seed. ... The Scythians, as I said, take some of this hemp-seed, and, creeping under the felt coverings, throw it upon the red-hot stones; immediately it smokes, and gives out such a vapour as no Grecian vapour-bath can exceed; the Scyths, delighted, shout for joy, and this vapour serves them instead of a water-bath; for they never by any chance wash their bodies with water.^[16]

What Herodotus called the "hemp-seed" must have been the whole flowering tops of the plant, where the psychoactive resin is produced along with the fruit ("seeds").^[17]

Herodotus also noted that the Thracians, a people who had intimate contact with the Scythians, introduced the plant to the Dacians where it became popular among a shamanic cult named the *Kapnobatai*, or "Those Who Walk in the Clouds." The shamans of the cult, also called *Kapnobatai*, were known to use hemp smoke to induce visions and trances.

Burial tombs of the Phrygians and Scythians frequently contained *cannabis sativa* seeds.^[4]

Several of the Tarim mummies excavated near Turpan in Xinjiang province of Northwestern China were buried with sacks of cannabis next to their heads.^[18] Based on additional grave goods, archaeologists concluded these individuals were shamans: "The marijuana must have been buried with the dead shamans who dreamed of continuing the profession in another world."^[19] A team of scientists analyzed one shamanistic tomb that contained a leather basket with well-preserved cannabis (789 grams of leaves, shoots, and fruits; AMS dated 2475 ± 30 years BP) and a wooden bowl with cannabis traces. Lacking any "suitable evidence that the ancient, indigenous people utilized *Cannabis* for food, oil, or fiber", they concluded "the deceased was more concerned with the intoxicant and/or medicinal value of the *Cannabis* remains."^[20] The Chinese archaeologist Hongen Jiang and his colleagues excavated a circa 2,400-2,800 BP tomb in northwest China's Turpan Basin and found the remains of an approximately 35-year-old man with Caucasian features who had been buried with thirteen 1-meter cannabis plants, placed diagonally across his chest. Jiang said this is the first archeological discovery of complete cannabis plants, as well as the first incidence of their use as a burial shroud.^{[21][22]}

Cannabis has been associated with Central Asian burial rituals around the 5th century BCE, as archaeological excavations in 1947 of a series of burial mounds at Pazyryk in the Altai Mountains of Siberia revealed 1.2 meter-high wooden frame tents in each of the mounds. Each frame surrounded a bronze vessel filled with the remains of hemp seeds and stones, and were presumably left smoking in the grave. In one of the mounds, a leather pouch containing hemp seeds, and scattered hemp, coriander, and melilotus seeds were also recovered.^[23] More recent excavations indicate the cannabis used in the most ancient burials were devoid of THC, while significantly stronger psychoactive cannabis was employed at least 2,500 years ago in the Pamir Mountains.^[24]

Historical Africa

According to Alfred Dunhill (1924), Africans have had a long tradition of smoking hemp in gourd pipes, asserting that by 1884 the King of the Baluka tribe of the Congo had established a "riamba" or hemp-smoking cult in place of fetish-worship. Enormous gourd pipes were used.^[25] Cannabis was used in Africa to restore appetite and relieve pain of hemorrhoids. It was also used as an antiseptic. In a number of countries, it was used to treat tetanus, hydrophobia, delirium tremens, infantile convulsions, neuralgia and other nervous disorders, cholera, menorrhagia, rheumatism, hay fever, asthma, skin diseases, and protracted labor during childbirth.^[26]

In Africa, there were a number of cults and sects of hemp worship. Pogge and Wissman, during their explorations of 1881, visited the Bashilenge, living on the northern borders of the Lundu, between Sankrua and Balua. They found large plots of land around the villages used for the cultivation of hemp. Originally there were small clubs of hemp smokers, bound by ties of friendship, but these eventually led to the formation of a religious cult. The Bashilenge called themselves *Bena Riamba*, "the sons of hemp", and their land Lubuku, meaning friendship. They greeted each other with the expression "*moio*", meaning both "hemp" and "life."^[27]

Each tribesman was required to participate in the cult of Riamba and show his devotion by smoking as frequently as possible. They attributed universal magical powers to hemp, which was thought to combat all kinds of evil and they took it when they went to war and when they traveled. There were initiation rites for new members which usually took place before a war or long journey. The hemp pipe assumed a symbolic meaning for the Bashilenge somewhat analogous to the significance which the peace pipe had for American Indians. No holiday, no trade agreement, no peace treaty was transacted without it. In the middle Sahara region, the Senusi sect also cultivated hemp on a large scale for use in religious ceremonies.^[28]

Germanic paganism

In ancient Germanic paganism, cannabis was possibly associated with the Norse love goddess, Freya.^{[29][30]} Linguistics offers further evidence of prehistoric use of cannabis by Germanic peoples: The word *hemp* derives from Old English *hænep*, from Proto-Germanic **hanapiz*, from the same Scythian word that *cannabis* derives from.^[31] The etymology of this word follows Grimm's Law by which Proto-Indo-European initial **k-* becomes **h-* in Germanic. The shift of **k* → *h* indicates it was a loanword into the Germanic parent language at a time depth no later than the separation of Common Germanic from Proto-Indo-European, about 500 BC.

The Celts may have also used cannabis, as evidence of hashish traces were found in Hallstatt, birthplace of Celtic culture.^[32]

Middle East

Cannabis oil was likely used throughout the Middle East for centuries before and after the birth of Christ.^[4] The Assyrians, Egyptians, and Israelites, among other Semitic cultures of the Middle East, mostly acquired cannabis from Aryan cultures and have burned it as an incense as early as 1000 BC. In Egypt, cannabis pollen was recovered from the tomb of Ramesses II, who governed for sixty-seven years during the 19th dynasty, and several mummies contain trace cannabinoids. Cannabis, as an incense, was used in the temples of Assyria and Babylon because "its aroma was pleasing to the Gods."

It has been generally held by academics specializing in the archaeology and paleobotany of Ancient Israel, and those specializing in the lexicography of the Hebrew Bible that cannabis is not documented or mentioned in early Judaism. Against this, some popular writers have argued that there is evidence for religious use of cannabis in the Hebrew Bible. The primary advocate of the religious use of cannabis in early Judaism was Polish anthropologist Sula Benet, who claimed that the plant *kaneh bosem* קִנְיָה-בֹּסֶם mentioned five times in the Hebrew Bible, and used in the holy anointing oil of the Book of Exodus, was cannabis.^[33] According to theories that hold that cannabis was present in Ancient Israelite society, a variant of hashish is held to have been present.^[34] While Benet's conclusion regarding the psychoactive use of cannabis is not universally accepted among Jewish scholars, there is general agreement that cannabis is used in talmudic sources to refer to hemp fibers, not hashish, as hemp was a vital commodity before linen replaced it.^[35] Lexicons of Hebrew and dictionaries of plants of the Bible such as by Michael Zohary (1985), Hans Arne Jensen (2004) and James A. Duke (2010) and others identify the plant in question as either *Acorus calamus* or *Cymbopogon citratus*, not cannabis.^[36]

In 2020, it was announced that cannabis residue had been found on the Israelite sanctuary altar at Tel Arad dating to the 8th century BCE of the Kingdom of Judah, suggesting that cannabis was a part of some Israelite rituals at the time.^[37]

United States

Cannabis is widely known because of the 1960s Hippy movement. "The Hippies were the largest, great social movement of remembered history. We changed everything, our generation, the lames called us the Hippies, we called ourselves, Brother and Sister. We smoked some pot and wanted to start civilization over again, clean slate both sides, replacing the evils of slavery, capitalism, communism, politics, commerce and religion with a New World View of brotherhood and a shared destiny. We started with the idea of Universal Birthright, it is a ganja thing, an acknowledgment that everyone has a righteous claim to a share of the blessing, that the Earth and Life itself was an interdependent, shared inheritance. That is where the spirit of the ganja kicks in, that the more you share the more you get, the seed thing, that is how we rolled, when rolling really was a thing. The Hippies were right about everything. We replaced alcohol with marijuana and that made all of the difference. The herb carries a spirit, a spirit of unfaltering righteousness that opened our minds to the hope and glory of peace and love. It was a moral and spiritual rearmament the likes of which had never been seen before. The music of the times records the vitality of the anti War movement, our disdain and rejection of the military industrial complex and the corrupt Nationalism it rode in on, fake patriotism. Our war heroes were the folks who refused to go, our support and defense of the soldiers was real, we will stop the War to protect and save everyone. The Hippies were against the Beast and it was a war but we replaced guns with pot and armies with communes growing organic food, yes the Hippies invented 'Organic' clean, natural living in harmony with nature. Are you starting to get the picture, not yet, ok, fire one up and be brought into remembrance of our ancient glory."^[38]

The more modern religion of Rastafarianism (recognized by the Supreme Court as a religion) is quite popular among youth and African American culture. Even more recently has been the emergence of an entirely new religious philosophy: cantheism. Cantheism is a word that signifies any and all attitudes towards the cannabis plant as a religious experience. While not technically a religion itself, it is a philosophy that examines the inherent religious nature of man's interaction with the cannabis plant.^[39]

United States v. Jefferson, 175 F. Supp. 2d 1123 (N.D. Ind. 2001) states:

As a practical matter, the Court is in agreement with the Government that smoking marijuana at religious rituals all day, every day appears abusive. However, even if the court held that smoking marijuana "all day every day" was excessive, it would still have to determine what an "acceptable level" of usage would be as part of Israel's religion since it is clear that a main doctrine of the religion involves smoking marijuana this much was conceded by the Government. This court has no evidentiary basis with which to make such a determination and any guesswork on the court's part would result in an administrative quagmire for the Probation Office. Thus, for purposes of the court's analysis, it will assume that Israel's usage is consistent with his religious practice.^[40]

High Times Magazine ran an article about Cantheism in 2019. (<https://hightimes.com/culture/cantheism-ma-kings-cannabis-religion/>) Chris Conrad: Upon leaving the seminary, Conrad worked in the anti-Vietnam War and civil rights movements for a number of years, but by 1988 found himself concentrating on cannabis activism. Based in Northern California, he became involved in the fight for Proposition 215 that, in 1996, legalized medical marijuana in the state. He also testified frequently in court. He and his wife, Mikki Norris, worked side by side for many years on marijuana activism, writing, and publishing.

Conrad coined the term Kantheism, which later became Cantheism (alternately spelled Cannatheism), in 1996, believing then that the fight for legalization was further along—and also wondering if he could establish a sacramental cannabis practice to bolster the defense of those on trial for marijuana offenses. Calling upon the history of sacramental cannabis use in parts of the world ranging from ancient Scythia and Thrace, to Egypt, India, and the Middle East, he wrote the Cantheist Creed and adopted the Egyptian hieroglyph for cannabis as a symbol.

THC Ministry, the International Church of Cannabis, the Church of Holy Smoke, and "far-flung branches of Cantheists" are cited. ^[41]

THC Ministry, The THC Ministry, founded by Roger Christie from the Religion of Jesus Church, is a religion^[1] which considers cannabis to be a sacrament. Members base their practices on what they see as an eclectic mixture of ancient wisdom, modern science, and the enlightening and healing properties of cannabis sacrament. Its mission includes "liberating the Cannabis plant and the minds of those who do and of those who do not revere it," and is actively involved in the legal and social discussions surrounding cannabis use in society. On July 8, 2010, Christie and 13 other individuals allegedly associated with the THC Ministry were indicted by a Federal grand jury in Honolulu on Marijuana Possession and Trafficking charges.^[2] Christie served four years in jail following an April 2014 sentencing, and is on probation until 2018. The name is based on the original Hawai'i Ministry of Cannabis Sacrament and all of its chapters, was founded in June 2000 by Roger Christie in Hawaii. It is present in many states of the United States, including Alabama, Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Ohio, Oregon, Wyoming, Texas, and Tennessee with at least one other chapter forming in New York. It is an officially registered religion in many countries on different continents.^[42]

THC Ministry sells a legal defense kit, as the members served prison time during USA prohibition: "Our Cannabis Sanctuary Kit provides you with proof of your legitimacy as a religious practitioner of Cannabis Sacrament. You become a full supporting member of the THC Ministry the moment you request your Cannabis Sanctuary Kit." ^[43]

Caribbean

It is not known when Rastafari first claimed cannabis to be sacred, but it is clear that by the late 1940s Rastafari was associated with cannabis smoking at the Pinnacle community of Leonard Howell. Rastafari see cannabis as a sacramental and deeply beneficial plant that is the Tree of Life mentioned in the Bible and quote Revelation 22:2, "... the herb is the healing of the nations." The use of cannabis, and particularly of long-stemmed water-pipes called chalices, is an integral part of what Rastafari call "reasoning sessions" where members join together to discuss life according to the Rasta perspective. They see the use of cannabis as bringing them closer to God (Jah), allowing the user to penetrate the truth of things more clearly.

While it is not necessary to use cannabis to be a Rastafari, many use it regularly as a part of their faith, and pipes of cannabis are dedicated to His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I before being smoked. According to the Watchman Fellowship "The herb is the key to new understanding of the self, the universe, and God. It is the vehicle to cosmic consciousness" and is believed to burn the corruption out of the human heart. Rubbing the ashes into the skin from smoked cannabis is also considered a healthy practice.

Part of the Rastafari movement, elders of the 20th-century religious movement known as the Ethiopian Zion Coptic Church, consider cannabis to be the "eucharist",^[45] claiming it as an oral tradition from Ethiopia dating back to the time of Christ.^[44]

Central and South America

Europe

International Movements

THC Ministry, which is the abbreviated and popularized name for the original Hawai'i Ministry of Cannabis Sacrament and all of its chapters, was founded in June 2000 by Roger Christie in Hawaii. It is present in Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and many states of the United States, including Alabama, Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Ohio, Oregon, Wyoming, Texas, and Tennessee with at least one other chapter forming in New York. It is an officially registered religion in many countries on different continents.^[45]

See also

- Cannabis and religion
- Entheogenic drugs and the archaeological record
- History of medical cannabis

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